

[REL Mid-Atlantic](#) Webinar  
**Educator Effectiveness Series: Assessing School Climate**  
**Q&A with Jonathan Cohen, Ph.D.**  
**May 7, 2015**

*This webinar discussed the elements in a positive school climate and shared different methods for assessing school data, including the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory. This Q&A addressed the questions participants had for Dr. Cohen following the webinar. The [webinar recording](#) and [PowerPoint presentation](#) are also available.*

## Questions

**1. How can school climate be measured? Are rubrics appropriate? Do observations, teacher reports, or student reports work best?**

The National School Climate Center suggests that the measurable components of school climate are safety (rules and norms, physical and social/emotional safety), teaching and learning (support for learning, prosocial instruction), interpersonal relationships (respect for diversity, social support/adults, social support/students), institutional environment (school connectedness/physical), and staff only (leadership, professional relationships). Safe Supportive Learning suggests that measurable components are engagement (relationships, respect for diversity, school participation), safety (emotional and physical safety, as well as substance use), and environment (physical, academic, wellness, disciplinary environment).

Measurement tools include the following:

- **Readiness assessments** reveal the schools' current strengths and needs for use in planning and support a continuous model of learning and development.
- **Comprehensive surveys** recognize student, parent/guardian, and school personnel voices on a range of safety, relationship, teaching, learning, and environmental issues. School leaders use comprehensive surveys as an engagement strategy and also to shape school improvement planning.
- **Community scales** recognize the opinions of community members and leaders and encourage school-community partnerships.
- **Process assessments** consider the tasks and challenges that shape each of the stages of the school climate improvement process: planning, evaluation, action planning, implementation, and beginning anew phases. Process assessments record what the school staff has done and has not done during each of these stages.

**2. How often is it helpful to measure school climate?**

Many schools and districts measure school climate annually, while others measure it every two or three years. Although meaningful schoolwide improvement efforts—in general—take three to five years, many district leaders need or want to assess climate annually. What is most important is how these data are used: as a “hammer” or a “flashlight”?

**3. Do new data points need to be collected to measure school climate? What existing metrics help measure school climate?**

It is important to use valid surveys to measure school climate. Some states have or are in the process of creating their own school climate rubrics, so using a valid survey either from a state or from an organization that has tested surveys for validity (such as the National School Climate Center) is recommended.

**4. How do data regarding attendance, suspension, referrals, cuts, etc., contribute to measuring school climate?**

Some schools and districts use these measures as additional information to accompany surveys. Schools and districts may compare behavioral data with the survey data and use the comparison to enhance their school climate improvement process.

**5. Do you recommend any specific surveys to assess climate?**

Surveys should include readiness (to understand current strengths and needs for use in planning and for use as a continuous model of learning and development) and should recognize student, parent/guardian, and school personnel voice. There are a variety of strong surveys, and it is important to use one that has passed validity tests. One example is the National School Climate Center’s survey, which is supported by various independent evaluations. There are currently three independent reviews of valid and reliable school climate surveys that school leaders may want to consult when selecting a survey (<http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/csci.php>).

**6. What approaches to survey design and use help reduce administrators’ fears of school climate survey results?**

Administrators are concerned that education data in general are being used as a “hammer” rather than a “flashlight.” Too often this is the case!

We suggest that central office and school board leaders consider how to use school climate data—and all education data—to support learning. The survey data should be used to identify and focus on the strengths and weaknesses of school climate. School climate data should be the starting point for a conversation. As no school is perfect, stakeholders should understand that

school climate surveys should be used to encourage collaboration and to improve school climate.

**7. Are there specific school climate surveys for use in early childhood and elementary schools?**

There are some school climate surveys that start in kindergarten or first grade, but it's challenging to find and/or create surveys that are developmentally appropriate for younger students. School climate surveys most often start in the second or third grade, but other measures can be used to develop a positive school climate from the early grades. Strategies include teachers promoting prosocial behavior and encouraging conversations about prosocial behavior. These strategies of engaging early learners can contribute to prosocial behavior in later grades.

**8. What do you do with the information you collect about school climate? Have you seen effective use of survey data, and has any success come from various measurement programs?**

Ideally, school leaders initially set in motion a community-wide conversation about “what kind of school do we want ours to be?” School climate findings then reveal current strengths and needs. This creates a “platform” that—ideally—supports students, parents, and school personnel conducting a gap analysis: what is the gap between our vision and current reality? And what specific, schoolwide instructional and/or relational goals do we want to work on together?

**9. How can the validity of various school climate measurements be tested?**

School climate surveys, including that of the National School Climate Center, have been tested for validity. Some states have or are developing their own school climate assessments in valid and reliable ways.

**10. Are there specific states that have strong models to follow in measuring school climate?**

Minnesota and Connecticut are two of a growing number of states that are invested in integrating school climate and related prosocial (e.g., social-emotional learning and character education) improvement efforts into Common Core and/or related cognitive and academic improvement efforts.

**11. Are the methods in your presentation applicable to schools with culturally diverse populations and where various languages are spoken?**

Yes.

**12. Are there different ways to address climate in schools with student populations coming from high-poverty backgrounds versus student populations coming from low-poverty backgrounds?**

It is always essential to recognize the social, emotional, and civic, as well as intellectual aspects, of student learning and school life. It is particularly important to do so in economically disadvantaged communities. School climate evaluations are one important and sound strategy that does recognize these dimensions.

**13. How can a new administrator assess school climate within the first year?  
Should a new administrator assess school climate within the first year?**

There is no simple right or wrong here. Many new administrators do use school climate surveys as a part of their effort to engage the whole community in conversations about goals, strengths, and needs, as well as to ignite the intrinsic motivation of students, parents, school personnel, and even community members to learn and work together to create even safer, more supportive, engaging, and healthy climates for learning.

**14. How can an instructional coach support a new teacher in understanding school climate?**

An instructional coach can support the creation of professional learning communities within schools and encourage collaboration among teachers to support an understanding of current school climate and improvement goals. They can also help build teams based on improving school climate and include school counselors and other personnel in these conversations.

**15. How can a newcomer to a school best learn about and respond to the school climate?**

A new staff member can ask administrators and look at survey data to learn more about school climate. A new administrator can look at historic data and/or administer surveys to collect data about school climate.

**16. What questions should a new teacher ask about school climate to inform instructional practice?**

The principal and other school personnel should come up with a plan for school improvement by using school climate data and asking, “What do we all want to work on together?” To learn more about school climate and school climate improvement plans, a new teacher can ask administrators and other school personnel.

**17. How can teachers support the climate of a school without administrator support?**

Administrator support and school personnel working as a team are crucial to school climate improvement. Trust among school personnel is an important part of implementing school climate plans, so it is important that school personnel are actively engaged in improvement plans.

**18. What is the connection between school climate and student engagement and academic achievement?**

Improving school climate is an effective prevention strategy for bully-victim-bystander behaviors and high school students dropping out of school. A strong school climate can help greatly in engaging students and families and supporting students in their academics and social-emotional skills.

**19. How does school climate impact student learning and development?**

Positive school climate leads to students feeling safe and comfortable in their schools, which positively impacts student learning and development.

**20. Which happens first, a change in school climate or a change in classroom climate, which then affects school climate?**

Changes in school climate and changes in classroom climate are overlapping but different. Strong teachers can create classrooms where students feel safe even in schools with overall negative climates.

**21. What is the best way to keep a positive attitude amidst a lethargic feeling of negativity throughout the district?**

Teamwork is crucial for improvements in school climate. By building strong teams of school personnel and involving students and parents and guardians in the school improvement process, teamwork and positive attitudes can develop around improving school climate.

**22. How can schools tie school climate to their school and district goals? How does that impact the measurement of school climate?**

School and district goals are primarily focused on cognitive learning. Student learning is, naturally, a primary goal for schools. Student learning is always social, emotional, and civic, as well as cognitive. School climate surveys and data can and should be used as one of several metrics that recognize and support the “whole child.”

**23. How can community-based organizations partner with schools to assess school climate?**

Schools need the help and support of the larger community in implementing school climate improvement plans. Community-based organizations can work with schools to see what kind of support and resources they can provide to support school improvement plans. Schools can reach out to community members to determine if they are interested in learning about the schools’ goals and how they can support schools in fulfilling their school climate improvement plans.

**24. How can you address survey fatigue in encouraging students, parents and guardians, and school personnel to complete surveys?**

Data collected are helpful when they are used for the improvement process. A school needs accurate data from as many stakeholders as possible to ensure that the data account for all opinions. It is effective to get all stakeholders invested by getting everyone involved and encouraging stakeholders to fill out surveys and explaining that the surveys will be used productively to plan for the school improvement process.

**25. How can we ensure that financial support is allocated for school climate improvement?**

Schools and districts can choose to prioritize school climate improvement and allocate money to support that improvement. Schools can take many steps to improve school climate, such as building trust and leadership within schools, creating professional learning communities, and encouraging support and collaboration among colleagues.